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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 000877

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SUBJECT: ABBAS AND HAMAS: LEFT-OF-CENTER ISRAELI LEADERS

DISCUSS ISRAEL-PA PROSPECTS

Classified By: Ambassador Richard H. Jones; Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

1. (C) Summary and Comment: In a February 28 discussion hosted by the Ambassador, left-of-center Israeli politicians and advisers advocated support for Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas and criticized the GOI's refusal to deal with him. The group generally agreed that the GOI should take a "wait and see" approach to a Hamas-led Palestinian Authority (PA), although some of the Israelis said that the GOI should deal with Hamas -- under certain circumstances -- on practical issues. The Israelis all expressed concern about the impact of the Hamas victory on regional stability, with several calling for increased pressure by the USG on Syria. The discussion demonstrated that many left-of-center Israelis disagree with FM Tzipi Livni's "Abbas is irrelevant" statement and that some are even prepared to deal with Hamas on practical issues. Yahad-Meretz Chairman Yossi Beilin, Labor MK Ephraim Sneh, Meretz MK Avshalom Vilan, former Mossad chief Ephraim Halevy, Council on Peace and Security President MG (ret.) Danny Rothschild, former Mossad officer and Barak adviser Pini Meidan, businessman Nimrod Novik, PolCouns, EconCouns, DATT, and poloffs participated in the discussion. Two Likud and Kadima guests invited to the lunch canceled at the last minute for different reasons. End Summary and Comment.

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Left-of-center politicians favor strengthening Abbas  
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2. (C) The Ambassador reviewed NEA A/S Welch's visit to the region on February 24-27 and explained the Quartet's three conditions as well as its views on maintaining humanitarian assistance and support for Abbas. Beilin agreed with the importance of maintaining contact with Abbas as an alternative to extremists. Sneh added that Israel should work with any ally it can find in its war against Islamic fundamentalism. Rothschild, a former Civil Administration Chief for the Occupied Territories, urged the GOI to differentiate between Hamas and the Palestinian people, and between Hamas and Abbas, when making decisions on assistance. He noted that the international community already has experience assisting the Palestinian people through NGOs (vice the PA).

3. (C) Sneh complained that the GOI "still sees Abbas as an enemy, not as a strategic partner," adding that "we have two choices, Hamas or Abbas." Together with Vilan, Sneh advocated international support for -- and GOI talks with -- Abbas. Sneh urged the international community to encourage Abbas to use the "tools of the presidency" to conduct diplomatic negotiations and to control significant portions of the PA budget. Halevy added that "Abbas will not confront extremists," but can play a useful role moderating Hamas, provided he is supported in "his own way." Novik claimed that the lack of Israeli support for Abbas prior to the PLC elections had "castrated" the PA president. The Ambassador mentioned that the international community believes that Abbas is both relevant and a helpful voice for moderation. Meidan took a dissenting view, claiming that Abbas is ineffective and that Israel has no real influence on domestic Palestinian politics.

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Uncertainty on how to deal with Hamas  
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4. (C) Beilin said that no one -- not the GOI, USG, Fatah, or Hamas -- knows how to deal with the outcome of the PLC election. He urged a "wait and see" approach. Halevy agreed, saying that the GOI does not have sufficient information to predict how Hamas will act. As proof, he claimed that the entire Israeli intelligence community had "got it wrong" when predicting the outcome of the PLC election.

5. (C) Beilin said he does not believe that Hamas will accept the international community's three conditions; Israel should instead focus on practical deliverables and establish clear benchmarks for Hamas. Novik agreed, suggesting three conditions: "unqualified tranquility" (i.e., an end to terror attacks); full transparency on "every penny" of assistance money; and agreement "not to violate existing agreements."

6. (C) Halevy insisted that "Hamas must be part of the

solution," predicting that younger, western-educated Hamas leaders will eventually gain more power. He called for interim arrangements on borders and a prolonged armistice instead of negotiations on final status. In his opinion, the GOI should remain on the sidelines and allow Abbas to work with Hamas. Novik said that he believes more moderate parts of Hamas within the West Bank and Gaza will gain influence at the expense of the radical leadership abroad. Rothschild disagreed, cautioning that Iran's influence should not be underestimated.

17. (C) Meidan was alone in calling for an immediate confrontation with Hamas, advocating a set of preconditions to "make Hamas become Shas," i.e., to moderate its religious extremism and to acknowledge the rules of the democratic process. He cautioned against using "western" logic to understand extremists and expressed doubt that Abbas or Fatah will be a viable alternative for the Palestinians in the near future. If Hamas refuses to change, he said, they will face a "war" from Israel. Vilan and several others rejected this scenario, saying it would lead to decades of conflict.

18. (C) Halevy said the goal should be to "corner" Hamas within the next year, something he believes is possible if the Quartet, Israel, Egypt and Jordan remain united. Sneh stressed the importance of maintaining unity among the international community, the GOI, and Abbas, but predicted that a united front will last no more than six months.

19. (C) Beilin predicted additional unilateral Israeli withdrawals following the March 28 Knesset election. He said the Israeli left would prefer that the GOI coordinate such action with the PA, but is "not against" unilateral moves. Meidan suggested that unilateral steps would be better than a freeze in the peace process. Sneh commented that it is unrealistic for Israel to expect any Palestinian or international recognition of unilateral attempts to set borders in the West Bank.

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Implications of the Hamas victory in the region  
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10. (C) Noting that Hamas is the first offshoot of the Moslem Brotherhood to obtain political power, Halevy and Rothschild expressed concern about the impact of a Hamas-led PA on Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. The Ambassador asked how problematic influences from regional actors such as Iran could be contained. Halevy replied that the USG and GOI should look for areas where Iran is vulnerable and should push for change in Syria -- a proposal backed by Rothschild. Sneh and Novik questioned whether a new Syrian government would be an improvement, with Meidan suggesting it would be better to change Syrian policy than risk a Syrian regime controlled by Islamic extremists. Sneh offered the view that "regime change in Iran is the key for (resolving) most of the problems in the region," including the struggle against Islamic fundamentalism and unrest in Iraq. Novik added that the problems in the region -- disarming Hizballah, containing Iran, taming Hamas, stabilizing Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt -- all require leadership by the United States.

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